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ABSTRACT

This report examines the recent drop in violent crime in the United States, discussing how much of the decrease seen between 1995-99 is attributable to juveniles (under age 18 years) and older youth (18-24 years). Analysis of current FBI arrest data indicates that not only did America's violent crime drop continue through 1999, but falling youth crime accounted for most of the overall decline. In 1999, law enforcement agencies made approximately 14 million arrests, 17 percent of which involved juveniles under age 18 years and 28 percent of which involved youth between age 18-24 years. This was 9 percent lower than in 1995. In 1999, juveniles accounted for 16 percent of all arrests for violent crimes, down from 19 percent in 1995. However, in 1999, juveniles accounted for a substantially larger proportion of arrests for weapon offenses than they ever did prior to 1990. Juveniles accounted for a decline of 29 percent in violent crime arrests between 1995-99. Juveniles and older youth accounted for 38 percent of the increase in violent crime arrests between 1985-95, but they accounted for 51 percent of the subsequent drop in violent crime between 1995-99. (SM)

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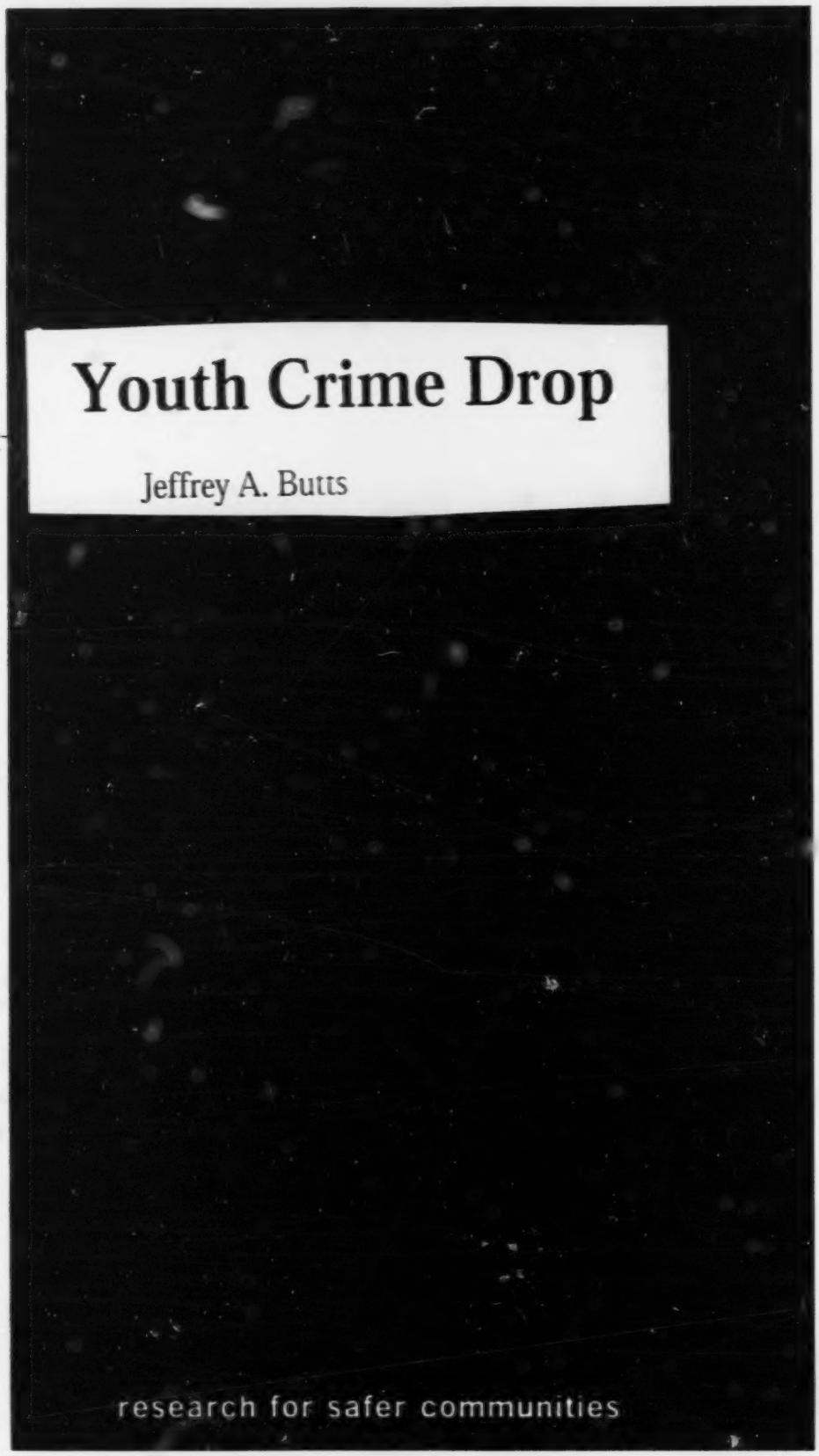
REPORT December 2000

Youth Crime Drop

Jeffrey A. Butts



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Youth Crime Drop

Summary

Researchers debate why violent crime in the United States suddenly dropped in the 1990s, but one fact all researchers endorse is that the overall decline in violent crime probably had much to do with falling rates of youth crime. This brief report from the Justice Policy Center examines the recent crime drop and asks how much of the decrease seen between 1995 and 1999 can be attributed to juveniles (under age 18) and older youth (ages 18 to 24). Using the most recent data from the FBI's *Uniform Crime Reports*, the analysis demonstrates that not only did America's violent crime drop continue through 1999, falling youth crime accounted for most of the overall decline.

The Author

Jeffrey A. Butts (Ph.D., University of Michigan) is a senior research associate with the Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center, where he is involved in research and evaluation projects on policies and programs for youthful offenders, including federally funded evaluations of teen courts and juvenile drug courts. Prior to joining the Urban Institute in 1997, he was a senior research associate at the National Center for Juvenile Justice.

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Acknowledgments

The methods used in this report to adjust FBI sample-based data and create national arrest estimates were developed by Dr. Howard Snyder of the National Center for Juvenile Justice. The author is grateful to the Justice Policy Center colleagues who provided comments and reviews of this report: Adele Harrell, Jeremy Travis, Calvin Johnson, and David Williams.

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The director of the Justice Policy Center is Dr. Adele Harrell.

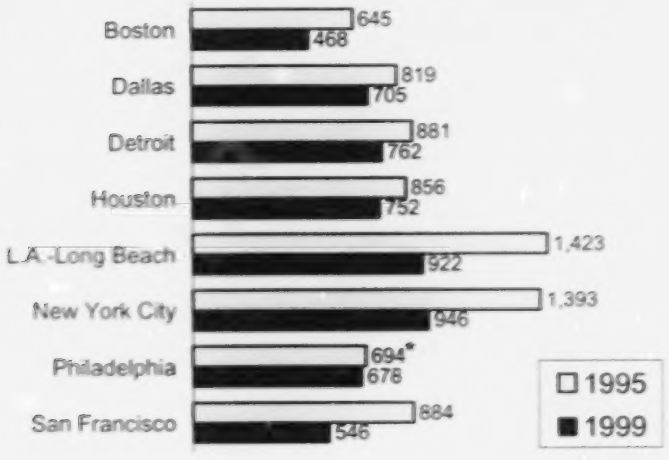
Introduction

After a decade of growth, the incidence of violent crime in America suddenly began to drop in the mid-1990s.[1] Criminologists propose various reasons for the sudden turnaround in violent crime. Explanations include a strong economy, changing demographics, changes in the market for illegal drugs and the use of firearms, expanded imprisonment, policing innovations, and a growing cultural intolerance for violent behavior (see Blumstein and Wallman, 2000).

Regardless of which explanation one favors, it is clear that previous increases as well as recent decreases in violent crime were disproportionately generated by the nation's youth. Criminal behavior has always been more prevalent among young people. Thus, studies of changing crime patterns need to distinguish juvenile crime and youth crime from crime by adults.[2] This report examines the most recent FBI data about police arrests and answers two important questions: 1) Did the crime drop that began in the mid-1990s continue through 1999? and, 2) How much of the drop in violent crime can be attributed to juveniles and youth under age 25?

In many large cities, fewer violent crimes were reported in 1999 than in 1995

Violent Index crimes reported per 100,000 inhabitants of the largest Metropolitan Statistical Areas in the U.S.



8 of 10 Largest MSAs in U.S.	Violent Crimes in 1999
Boston	16,024
Dallas	22,284
Detroit	34,275
Houston	29,985
L.A.-Long Beach	86,220
New York City	82,602
Philadelphia	33,528
San Francisco	9,330

Note: 2 of the 10 largest Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA) did not report sufficient data on "reported crimes" to the FBI in 1995 or 1999 or both — Chicago and Washington, DC-Baltimore.

* Data from 1994

Source: Urban Institute analysis of data from Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Crime in the United States*, annual. Washington, DC: FBI, U.S. Department of Justice. Violent Index crimes include murder and non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault.

1. The year thought to be the beginning of the crime decline varies depending on which data elements are used to measure violent crime. This report defines the peak year of violent crime in the United States as 1995, when the national number of arrests for Violent Crime Index offenses reached a high point of nearly 800,000 arrests in one year. By 1999, total violent crime arrests had fallen to 644,770.

2. The term "juvenile" is used throughout this report to describe all offenders under age 18 although this is not the legal definition of the term. Some states extend the legal status of "juvenile" only through age 15 (CT, NC, and NY). Others extend it only through age 16 (GA, IL, LA, MA, MI, MO, NH, SC, TX, and WI). Law enforcement data usually include only the age of offenders and not their legal status.

Number of Arrests

This report focuses on data about arrests. It would be preferable to analyze crimes reported to police rather than arrests made by police, but national information about reported crimes is not available by different age categories. Many reported crimes are never resolved by an arrest. Thus, the age of the offender is unknown. Still, examining the age profile of those arrested can reveal much about the relative contribution of young people to crime patterns.

In 1999, U.S. law enforcement agencies made an estimated 14 million arrests. Of these, 17 percent involved juveniles under age 18. Another 28 percent involved youth between the ages of 18 and 24.

The number of arrests involving juveniles in 1999, 2.5 million, was 9 percent lower than the number of arrests in 1995. Arrests for many of the most serious offenses fell substantially between 1995 and 1999. During this time period arrests for murder dropped 56 percent among juveniles, robbery arrests were 39 percent lower, burglary arrests fell 23 percent, and juvenile arrests for motor vehicle theft were down 35 percent.

The small size of the total decline in juvenile arrests (-9 percent) was largely due to the influence of growing arrests in some of the less serious offenses. For example, arrests for driving under the influence were up 36 percent, liquor law violations grew 31 percent, and arrests for curfew violations increased 9 percent.

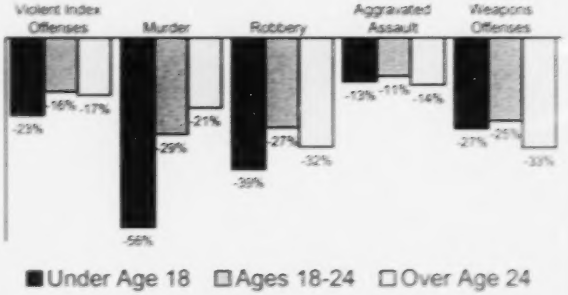
Juvenile arrests declined 9% between 1995 and 1999, with larger decreases in violent offenses

	National estimate of juvenile arrests, 1999	Change: 1995 - 99
All Offenses	**2,468,800**	**-9%**
Violent Crime Index offenses	**103,900**	**-23**
Murder/non-negligent manslaughter	1,400	-56
Forcible rape	5,000	-11
Robbery	28,000	-39
Aggravated assault	69,600	-13
Index property	**541,500**	**-24**
Burglary	101,000	-23
Larceny-theft	380,500	-23
Motor vehicle theft	50,800	-35
Arson	9,200	-19
Selected other offenses		
Other assaults	237,300	2
Weapons	42,500	-27
Drug abuse violations	198,400	1
Driving under the influence	23,000	36
Liquor laws	165,700	31
Disorderly conduct	176,200	-3
Curfew / loitering	170,000	9
Runaways	150,700	-28

Source: Urban Institute analysis of data from Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Crime in the United States*, annual. Washington, DC: FBI, U.S. Department of Justice.

Murder and robbery arrests declined more among juveniles than among older youth and adults

Percent change in arrests for selected offenses, 1995-1999



Source: Urban Institute analysis of data from Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Crime in the United States*, annual. Washington, DC: FBI, U.S. Department of Justice.

Arrest Rates

Studies of changes in juvenile crime should always consider the possibility that fluctuations in the juvenile population may be responsible for trends seen in the number of arrests reported by law enforcement.

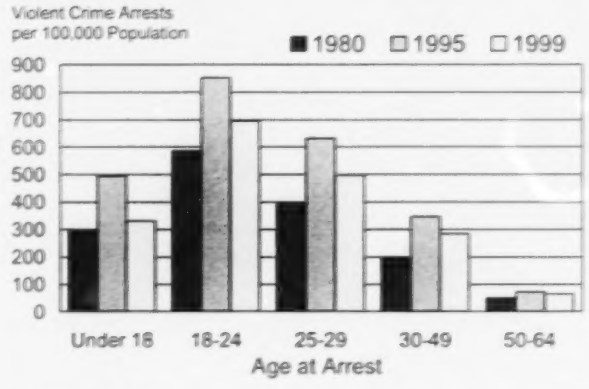
This was not the case during the recent crime drop. Even controlling for changes in the population, the rate of decline in juvenile arrests outpaced that of other age groups.

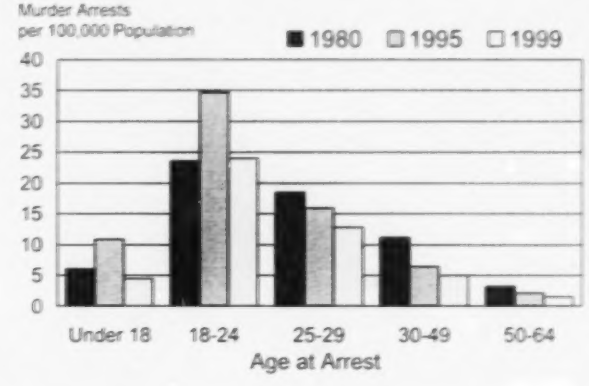
For every 100,000 youth age 10 to 17 in the U.S. population during 1999, there were more than 300 juvenile arrests for one of the four Violent Crime Index offenses (i.e., murder, forcible rape, aggravated assault, and robbery).

The violent crime arrest rate fell among all age groups between 1995 and 1999. The juvenile arrest rate for Violent Crime Index offenses in 1999 was about two-thirds the rate of 1995. The rate in 1999, however, was still 10 percent higher than the rate of 1980.

The arrest rate for murder charges also fell among all age groups between 1995 and 1999. Among older offenders, the drop continued a downward trend that resulted in declines between 1980 and 1995 as well. The decline among juveniles brought the murder arrest rate to a level lower than that of 1980, while the rate among older youth (ages 18 to 24) was approximately the same in 1999 as in 1980.

Violent crime arrest rates fell among all ages from 1995 to 1999 yet remained above 1980 levels





Percent Change in Arrest Rates, 1995-1999

Age at Arrest	All Violent Crime	Murder
Under 18 (juveniles)	–33%	–59%
18-24 (youth)	–18	–31
25-29	–21	–20
30-49	–18	–23
50-64	–11	–29

Source: Urban Institute analysis of data from Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States*, annual. Washington, DC: FBI, U.S. Department of Justice.

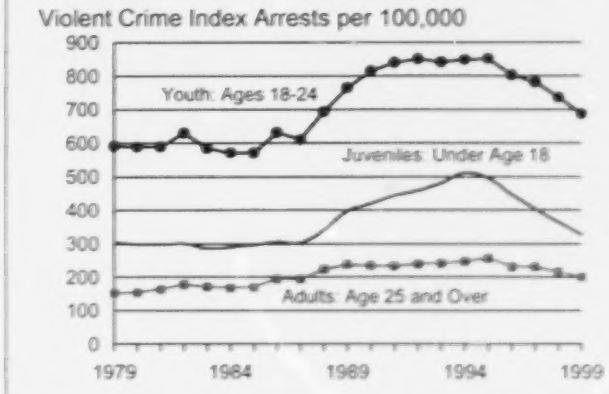
Despite the sharp drop in violent crime arrests between 1995 and 1999, arrest rates for older youth (ages 18 to 24) remained considerably higher than the rates of juveniles.

The violent crime arrest rate for offenders between the ages of 18 and 24 was more than double the rate for juveniles in 1999.

By 1999, the violent crime arrest rate for juveniles had fallen nearly to the levels seen during the early 1980s.

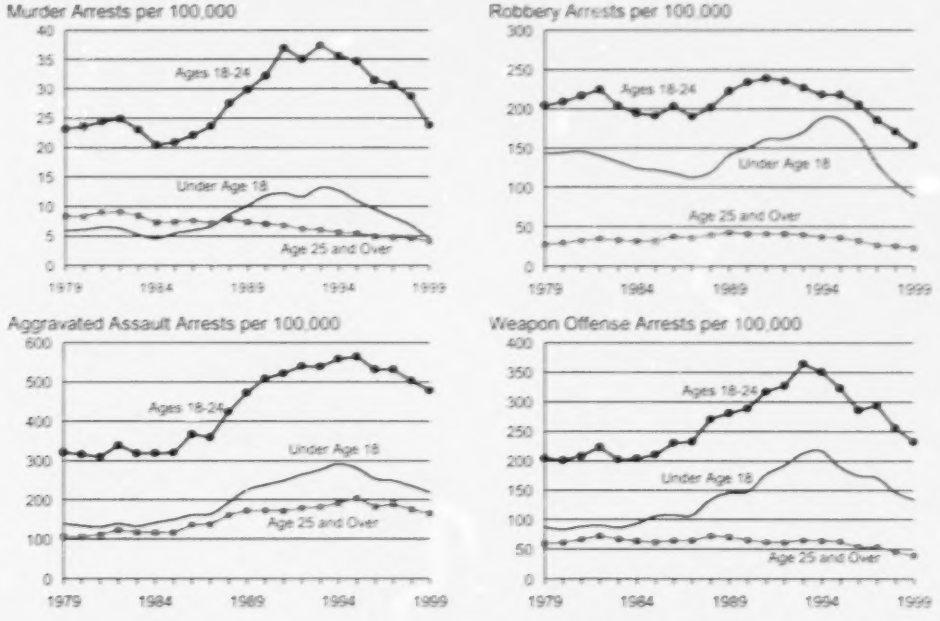
The rate of violent crime arrests for adults was relatively unchanged throughout the 1990s when compared to rates among juveniles and older youth.

The violent crime arrest rate for youth remained far higher than the rate for juveniles during the 1990s



Source: Urban Institute analysis of data from Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States*, annual. Washington, DC: FBI, U.S. Department of Justice.

Arrest rates for weapon offenses paralleled the decline in violent crime



Source: Urban Institute analysis of data from Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States*, annual. Washington, DC: FBI, U.S. Department of Justice.

Juvenile Proportion of All Arrests

When arrests involving juvenile offenders decline more sharply than arrests involving older offenders, the relative proportion of juveniles among all those arrested necessarily falls. This effect can be seen in the FBI data on juvenile arrests as a proportion of all arrests for various offenses.

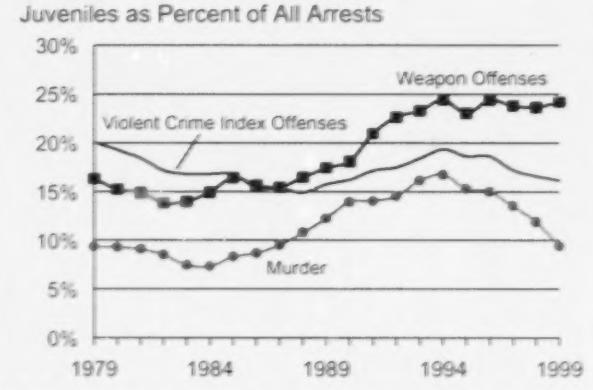
In 1999, juveniles accounted for 16 percent of all arrests for Violent Crime Index offenses, down considerably from 1995 when juveniles accounted for 19 percent of violent crime arrests.

Juveniles accounted for 9 percent of murder arrests in 1999, compared with the period 1993 through 1995 when they made up 15 to 17 percent of murder arrests.

In contrast to these patterns, juveniles accounted for a substantially larger proportion of arrests for weapon offenses in 1999 than they did at any time prior to 1990.

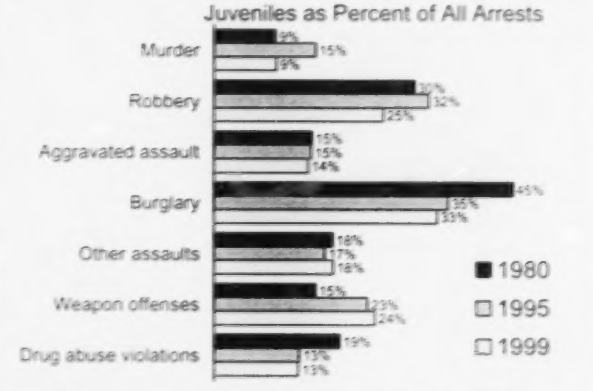
As a whole, arrest rates for weapon offenses declined between 1994 and 1999, but both juveniles and adults experienced similarly declining arrest rates. Thus, the percentage of juveniles among all weapon arrests was relatively unchanged.

Juveniles account for a smaller percentage of violent crime arrests, but the juvenile percentage of weapon arrests has not fallen since the mid-1990s



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Crime in the United States*. annual. Washington, DC: FBI, U.S. Department of Justice.

For some offenses, the juvenile percentage of arrests was lower in 1999 than in 1980



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Crime in the United States*. annual. Washington, DC: FBI, U.S. Department of Justice.

Youth Contribution to the Crime Drop

The central question posed by this report is "how much did juveniles and older youth contribute to the national crime drop between 1995 and 1999?" This question can be answered by examining the relative increases and decreases in arrests between 1985 and 1999.

According to *Crime in the United States*, there were 796,230 total arrests for Violent Crime Index offenses in 1995 and 644,770 in 1999 (national estimates). Thus, there were 151,460 fewer violent crime arrests in 1999 than in 1995 (all ages combined).

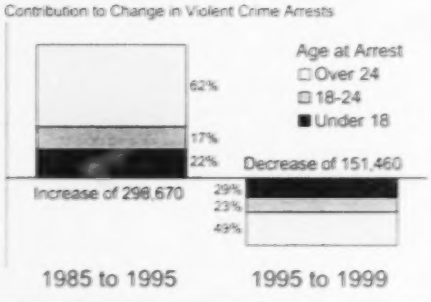
The contribution of juveniles to the total drop in violent crime arrests can be estimated by calculating the decrease in the number of arrests involving juveniles and comparing it to the decrease for offenders of all ages.

The results of this comparison suggest that juveniles accounted for a decline of 43,800 arrests — i.e., 29 percent of the overall decrease in violent crime arrests between 1995 and 1999.

Older youth, on the other hand, accounted for 23 percent of the decline, while adults ages 25 and older accounted for 49 percent of the total decrease.

In contrast, juvenile offenders accounted for 22 percent of the increase in violent crime arrests between 1985 and 1995, while older youth accounted for 17 percent. Thus, juveniles and older youth combined made up 38 percent of the increase in violent crime arrests between 1985 and 1995, but they accounted for 51 percent of the subsequent drop in violent crime between 1995 and 1999.

Youth accounted for 51 percent of the recent decline in violent crime, but only 38 percent of the increase that preceded it



Increase: 1985 to 1995

Age	Arrests 1985	Arrests 1995	Size of change	Share of change
Under 18	83,400	147,700	64,300	22%
18 to 24	164,960	214,620	49,660	17%
Over 24	249,200	433,910	184,710	62%
Total	497,560	796,230	298,670	

Decrease: 1995 to 1999

Age	Arrests 1995	Arrests 1999	Size of change	Share of change
Under 18	147,700	103,900	-43,800	29%
18 to 24	214,620	180,455	-34,165	23%
Over 24	433,910	360,415	-73,495	49%
Total	796,230	644,770	-151,460	

Source: Urban Institute analysis of data from *Crime in the United States*, annual. Washington, DC: FBI, U.S. Department of Justice.
Note: Details may not add precisely due to rounding.

Methods

The national arrest estimates presented in this report (as well as the per capita rates based upon those estimates) were derived from the *Uniform Crime Reporting Program* (UCR) of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The FBI collects annual information on arrests made by law enforcement agencies throughout the United States. Data about arrests are collected from jurisdictions containing a majority of the population, typically between 60 percent and 90 percent of residents nationwide. The UCR data are used to describe the number and characteristics of juveniles who are arrested by police each year.

Using the UCR data to analyze juvenile arrests can be difficult. The primary publication of the UCR data, *Crime in the United States*, includes data only from police agencies able to participate fully in the UCR program each year. Data must be submitted to the FBI on time and the data must represent arrests over a minimum number of months during each year. Moreover, the FBI publishes just one national estimate of arrests for each major offense category, and this estimate represents offenders of all ages. In *Crime in the United States 1999*, national estimates may be found in Table 29 (revised). The FBI does not calculate separate national estimates for different age groups.

In order to present national arrest estimates for various age groups and to calculate per capita arrest rates for those groups, this report uses an estimation procedure developed by Dr. Howard Snyder at the National Center for Juvenile Justice. The procedure uses the data reported by UCR-participating jurisdictions to determine the proportion of arrests for each offense that involved individuals of various ages. Then, those proportions are applied to the FBI's national estimate for that offense. Arrest rates are determined by dividing each national estimate over the appropriate population data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

For more information about using the FBI's juvenile arrest data, see Snyder and Sickmund (1999).

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